



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE CONCEPTION OF THE ABSOLUTE.

ABSOLUTE Idealism, whatever may be its merits or demerits, is one of the recognized modes of thinking in the civilized world at the present day. The way of thinking which it represents moves "at present in one form or another side by side with the advancing spread of Spencerian thought, and appears more and more as the reliance of those who would vindicate an eternal person against the hostile theory of agnosticism."¹ The presentations of the theory have been so numerous that there is hardly any real call for adding one more to the list. On the other hand, it seems very necessary to pause for a while, in order to enter fully into the significance of the conception of the Absolute. It is indeed true that in philosophy the method is at least as important as the conclusion. But the chief *interest* not only of the 'general reader,' but of philosophers also, centers in the conclusion. The methods of different thinkers are, after all, only ways of approach, more or less determined by subjective predilections, to the common goal, viz., truth. I propose, therefore, in this paper, to inquire what the conception of the Absolute is, or rather must be, and do not intend to ask how it is reached. It has all along been the boast of absolute idealism that it is not only consistent with, but is the only theory which can supply a foundation to, ordinary experience and science. All that we have to do, then, is to take this boast seriously and to ask how, if it is to be made good, the Absolute must be conceived. A conception of the Absolute which is violently opposed to the conclusions of science and the sober common sense of practical men must, at once, be rejected as such, however plausible and apparently unanswerable may be the arguments urged in its behalf. A theory that is not congruous with well-verified facts is worse than an idle dream. Of course, it cannot be affirmed that a philosophical theory is to accept uncritically brute facts and bring itself into line with them. It does not fulfil its function, unless it interprets

¹ *The Conception of God*, p. xxviii.

them and assigns to them their proper places with reference to each other in the totality of a system. But in explaining facts, we must be careful not to explain them away. This is the caution which all theorists ought constantly to bear in mind.

It is not necessary to dwell long upon the proposition that 'the Absolute is thought.' If there is any one theme which has received elaborate treatment at the hands of thinkers belonging to the idealistic school, it is that the essential nature of the Absolute is thought. Indeed, so much has this been the case that, at the present day, the reproach is constantly leveled against absolute idealism that by conceiving of the Absolute as mere thought, it only hypostasizes an abstraction. Perhaps in reaction against the prevailing sensationalism this was inevitable in England. But so great a stress has been laid upon the conception of the Absolute as thought, that, in consequence of it, the scope and significance of even Hegel's *Logic*, the source of almost all recent idealistic theories, has been misunderstood. We have been in danger of forgetting that the categories, and the Absolute as the system of them, are the merest abstractions, unless they are realized in particular items of experience. If the sensationalists are wrong in conceiving of knowledge as constituted by brute facts of experience alone, the idealists are equally wrong in making abstract thought all in all. Mr. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* was published in the nick of time, and became a potent corrective of the somewhat one-sided manner in which absolute idealism has until lately been interpreted. The Absolute is thought as well as experience. So much is involved in Kant's suggestive conception of an intuitive understanding. Professor Josiah Royce, in his latest and maturest exposition of absolute idealism, expressly defines the Absolute as both thought and experience. Of course, it is possible to give a very wide meaning to the term 'thought' and make it inclusive of what we understand by 'experience.' I have myself no doubt that this is what has been done by the followers of Hegel who are accustomed to speak of the Absolute as thought or reason. But Professor Royce has done well to disarm critics by explicitly setting forth the true meaning of the statement that the Absolute is thought. "There is," says he,

“an absolute experience, for which the conception of an absolute reality, *i. e.*, the conception of a system of ideal truth, is fulfilled by the very contents that get presented to this experience. . . . For the absolute experience, as for ours, there are data, contents, facts. But these data, these contents, express, for the absolute experience, its own meaning, its thought, its ideas.”¹ The much-misunderstood philosophy of Hegel is very explicit in affirming the Absolute to be both thought and experience. Hegel never loses sight of Kant’s intuitive understanding. If you judge him by his *Logic* alone, he is, to be sure, guilty of the most mischievous error into which a philosopher has ever fallen. But has he not told us in metaphorical language that *Logic* moves in the realm of abstractions, and exhibits to us the nature of God as He is in Himself before creation? Avoiding metaphor, the plain meaning is that *Logic* shows us what God is as thought. Thought, however, involves experience, and this Hegel affirms more than once. Take section 244 of the *Encyclopædia*, for instance. A careful perusal of it reveals unmistakably his meaning, and removes the so-called mystery of the transition from *Logic* to *Nature*. “The idea which is independent or for itself, when viewed on the point of its unity with itself, is perception, or intuition, and the idea to be perceived is *Nature*. But as intuition, the idea is invested with the one-sided characteristic of immediacy, or of negation, by means of an external reflection. But the idea is absolutely free ; and its freedom means that it does not merely pass over into life, or as finite cognition allow life to show in it, but in its own absolute truth resolves to let the element of its particularity or of the first characterization and ‘other-being,’ the immediate idea, as its reflection, go forth freely itself from itself as *Nature*.”² So let there be no misunderstanding in future as to the meaning of the proposition, the Absolute is thought. In holding fast to it, idealism does not and cannot ignore concrete experience.

The question of far greater importance at the present juncture, is that of the relation of the will to the Absolute. Professor

¹ *The Conception of God*, pp. 43-44.

² Wallace’s Translation of Hegel’s *Logic*, 1st ed., p. 328.

Royce is the only defender of absolute idealism who has even raised it ; but his treatment of it, however striking and instructive, does not, it seems to me, adequately solve the problem. What he does is to identify will, in its essential features, with attention, and to attribute it to the Absolute ; because attention, as he argues, is the "sacrifice of ideal possibilities for the sake of realizing ideas." "It is losing to win—losing bare abstractions to find concrete life." "The Divine Will is simply that aspect of the Absolute which is expressed in the concrete and differentiated individuality of the world." It is difficult to understand why attention alone should be regarded as the type of will. Even in this way, there is no chance of getting rid of "the psychological accidents of our volitional experience." Psychology tells us that we cannot conceive of attention as utterly divorced from muscular and skin sensations. Desire, choice, and efficacious effort are certainly inseparable from will, and are as much involved in attention as in bodily activity. Professor Royce maintains that these three aspects of "what is popularly regarded as volition come to us, primarily, as facts of human experience colored through and through by the special conditions of our human mental life." If this be the ground of denying will, *as we know it*, to the Absolute, why, for exactly the same reason, you cannot predicate experience of it. If it be a valid objection to say that the Absolute cannot have anything like the will which we find in human beings, because it has no muscles, we can argue in the very same strain that it has no experience, because it has not eyes to see, ears to hear, skin to touch, and so on. To be sure, it is ridiculous to regard the Absolute as putting forth effort or meeting with resistance ; but this is so, not because it does not possess experiences of this sort, but because they, belonging to us in a fragmentary and one-sided manner, as the incident of our finitude, are merged in its higher consciousness, of which, perhaps, we have no adequate conception. If the Absolute in me is resisted by the wall, it, *in the wall*, offers resistance, and in the whole all finite experiences of acting and of being acted upon are merged in a richer experience.¹ The absolute experience includes my finite experi-

¹ After all, I do not see how Professor Royce himself can avoid this conclusion.

ence, and contains within itself the feelings that I have, toothache, the delight of a Turkish bath, and all. How can the case be different with such sensations and feelings as are involved in will? If any one is disposed to smile at a thought like this, I only ask him to state his own notion of the operation of God's will in the universe in *intelligible* terms, instead of taking shelter under a string of meaningless phrases. An essential ingredient of will is the consciousness of effort and of being resisted, and I do not, therefore, see how it is possible to follow Professor Royce in attenuating it to mere attention. Besides, there is a more formidable objection to the adoption of this course. Science tells us that the universe is the manifestation of what it calls 'force' or 'energy.' How is this doctrine, I ask, to be reconciled with absolute idealism? At the outset of this paper, it has been pointed out that idealism, if it is not to stultify itself, must be consistent with common sense and science. Does Professor Royce's theory conform to this canon? It is perfectly certain that scientific men will decidedly say 'no,' if you tell them that what they call 'force' is at best only attention. You cannot demand an alternative theory from them. Their business is to state facts, and not to propound theories. It is for the philosopher to theorize, and if his speculations do not harmonize with facts, so much the worse for the speculations. The facts cannot disappear because your theory does not accommodate itself to them. For my part, I see no escape from Professor Ladd's thesis that "if the empty term 'energy' or 'force' be displaced by a word which has a meaning representable in some concrete, actual experience, such word is found to signify our immediate knowledge of ourselves as wills."¹ Professor Ladd truly remarks that "the hidden qualities and forces with which we endow things—especially the possession of 'force' in general, or of some 'mode of energy'—are conceptions abstracted from our experience as self-

Let us ignore 'inanimate' nature, for the sake of argument. Now the myriads of living beings on earth have all muscular feelings, and the absolute experience, on Professor Royce's own showing, is inclusive of them. Muscular and skin sensations, therefore, *do* belong to the Absolute; only it overcomes and transcends them. My own thesis does not imply anything more than this.

¹ *Philosophy of Knowledge*, p. 223.

active in relation to the objects of our cognition." Attention, I submit, can never be regarded as the only proper form of will. At its highest, will consists of attention, consciousness of effort, desire, purposive choice, and adaptation of means to ends. At its lowest, it cannot be without the sense of effort. In short, we cannot understand what will is, if we eliminate from it the feeling of effort. To the Absolute, then, we must attribute such feeling, *so far as the particular modes of its manifestation are concerned.*

In the totality of its life, the feelings of resistance and effort, experienced in the parts, are submerged, and transformed into a higher kind of active consciousness, which is an inseparable aspect of the Absolute. Absolute personality, or rather *super-personality*,¹ is also absolute will, and includes within itself feelings of effort and resistance, which are the component factors, though not the whole, of will. Such a conception may have its difficulties, and may even seem mythological, but only in this way, I venture to assert, can absolute idealism reconcile itself with facts so dear to scientific men. Systems of cosmic theism, like those of Mr. Fiske and Professor Le Conte, are directly based upon well-ascertained truths of science. Why should absolute idealism alone be so shy of them?

It is not necessary to enter upon a long discussion of the relation of feeling to the Absolute. Feeling, we learn from psychology, cannot be separated from will, and if the universe must be viewed as the manifestation of the Divine Will, feeling cannot but be regarded as an essential ingredient in the life of the Absolute. Pleasure is the concomitant of harmony, and pain that of discord. But the strifes and jolts of the parts are lulled and harmonized in the Absolute, and the feeling which the Absolute experiences must, therefore, be one of pleasure that drowns all forms of pain. The *Vedanta* philosophy of India truly speaks of the Absolute as *Anandam* or blissful. Mr. Bradley's great work marks a new era in philosophical speculations in conceiving of the Absolute as possessed of a balance of pleasure over pain.

The Absolute is an "eternally complete consciousness." Any lesser definition of it is self-contradictory, and raises anew all the

¹ See below.

difficulties for overcoming which the conception is framed. But there is the stubborn fact of time. How is the reality of time to be reconciled with the completeness of the Absolute? Professor Royce truly observes that "theory demands that the eternal world should be a finished whole." But "the 'eternal now,'" as he is careful to point out, "is simply not the temporal present." The 'eternal now,' in short, is inclusive of past, present, and future, in which they are all held in solution. But, alas! such a notion, instead of lessening our difficulties, only increases them. Is there not a *real* difference between past, present, and future? If so, what becomes of it if you conceive of the 'eternal now' as inclusive of them all? Perhaps a satisfactory solution of the problem is beyond us. All that can be attempted is to offer some suggestions towards a partial clearing up of the mystery. The Absolute, without doubt, knows past and future as much as the present. So much is conceded by ordinary understanding when it believes God to be omniscient. But, to speak the truth, our robust common sense revolts against idealism, be it absolute or not, when we are told that though Julius Cæsar is dead, he is alive at the present moment and is conquering Spain, Gaul, Greece, and Egypt. "Babylon and Tyre seem unreal to us, but *those* cities are real, and the throb of life pulses through the veins of their citizens, even now, just as truly and strongly as it does through yours." How does the reader appreciate a statement like this? Unquestionably, there is an element of truth in it, but we must take care to ascertain the exact measure of it. We cannot help thinking that even in the consciousness of the Absolute, there is, in some shape or other, a real difference between past, present, and future, though they are all together in the vision of the 'eternal now.' We do not deny that the gulf-stream really moves forward, albeit there is no progressive movement in the total volume of water on earth. The knowledge of past and future which the Absolute has is not conceptual, as the case is with us. Nor is it merely perceptual. It is a union of both, which, as we have seen before, is the type of the Absolute consciousness. The criterion of difference, besides that furnished by succession, between past, present, and future seems to lie in the manifestations

of will, such as we have seen it really to be, involved in the present, while the representation of past and future implies attention only. One of my objections to Professor Royce's theory of the will, therefore, is that it takes away all means of drawing a *real* distinction between past and present in the experience of the Absolute. Of course, if you deny any such distinction, there is an end of the matter. But, I confess, I do not see how the denial can be made good. All things, past, present, and future, are put together in the 'eternal now' of the Absolute, but this does not cancel the real succession of time. If we do not fully understand how the eternal completeness of the Divine consciousness is reconcilable with the actual flow of time, we no more comprehend how in it the flow can be stopped. Professor Royce is explicit in declaring: "From the absolute point of view, there is real change and in only one direction, in time; in brief, all temporal items and significances remain what they are, even while, as included in the completer whole, they are viewed as forming a part of the content of the Eternal Instant."¹ But Professor Royce does not say by what sign the present is to be distinguished from past or future in the eternal instant. This sign, I maintain, is that while the present contains actual expression of force, or, from our point of view, manifestations of the Absolute Will, involving but transcending experiences of resistance and effort, the past and future are only intuited and presuppose attention alone. Unless you make a real distinction between past and present other than that which depends on succession, succession itself loses all its meaning. Major Marchand's occupation of Fashoda is followed by Lord Salisbury's protest against it, and this by Major Marchand's recall. But if you do not discover some means of drawing a real distinction between what is over and what is going on, you are at once driven to the absurdity of saying that in the knowledge of the Absolute, Major Marchand is as actually occupying Fashoda, as he is leaving it.

Important as is the question of the relation of the Absolute to time-process, the fiercest battle of idealism has been fought over the problem of individuality. Almost all the assailants of abso-

¹*The Conception of God*, p. 348.

lute idealism have regarded its solution of this problem as its most vulnerable point, and have accordingly directed their main attack to it. In the volume entitled the *Conception of God*, which contains the latest and, in many respects, the freshest discussion on absolute idealism, Professor Howison joins issue with Professor Royce on the question of individuality, and declares that a theory like that advocated by Professor Royce is not absolute idealism at all, because "its exact fault is, not waiting for thought to take the fruitful roundness of its entire ideal, before declaring its equivalence to the real." A theory, according to him, is not tenable, unless it provides for "a plurality of such strictly free minds as cannot be contained in the unity of any single consciousness." Now, as has been already pointed out, there can be no doubt that a theory which cannot account for facts indubitably clear to common sense stands self-condemned. But common sense does not demand a *theory*. Its simple requirement is satisfied if, in the process of explanation, facts are not frittered away. In saying that we must "attain to the distinct reality, the full *otherhood* of the creation, and to the *moral* reality of the creature, which means his self-determining freedom not merely with reference to the world of sense, but also with reference to the creator," Professor Howison does not state *facts*, but propounds a *theory*. Neither common sense nor moral and religious sense has the right to dictate terms to philosophy. Philosophy is bound to satisfy the legitimate demands of common sense, though the demands may be so set forth as to make it impossible for any consistent theory to meet them. Absolute idealism has never ignored the claims of the individual. On the contrary, Hegel expressly attributes the superiority of his system over that of Spinoza to the fact that his Absolute is not like the lion's den, but gives full freedom and reality to the individual. The freedom of the individual, however, is not different from, but is a part of, the freedom of the Absolute. As Professor Royce finely puts it, "the individual experience is identically a part of God's experience, *i. e.*, not similar to a portion of God's experience, but identically the same as such portion." Again, "the individual is free with identically the same freedom as is God's

freedom, only that the individual's freedom is not the whole of God's freedom, but is a unique part thereof."¹

Now I submit that this fully satisfies all that common sense can reasonably demand. An objection which Professor Howison urges against absolute idealism seems to me to strikingly demonstrate the freedom of the finite individual. He maintains that the reasoning on which absolute idealism is made to stand has a tendency to lead to solipsism. "If there is but one and the same final self for us each and all, then, with a literalness indeed appalling, He is We, and We are He; nay He is I and I am He!" "The finite self and the infinite self are but two names at the opposite poles of one lonely reality, which from its isolation is without possible moral significance."² To be sure, the finite self and the infinite self are but two names at the *opposite* poles of one reality, but I do not admit that such a reality is lonely. He is I, most assuredly; but, be it remembered, He is also *We*. Far from a thought like this leading to solipsism, it is exactly what makes the city of God, whose reality Professor Howison is so nobly anxious to keep intact, stand upon the surest and most abiding foundation. However that may be, what I wish to point out here is this: In so far as I am He, I enjoy freedom even as God Almighty Himself enjoys it. What more can we expect? We are not one whit less free than God is. Surely this ought to satisfy the most ardent champion of individuality and free will. Professor Howison, however, stands up for a doctrine which I know not how to conceive. He believes in "the mutually transcendent and still thoroughly knowable reality of God and souls." It is difficult to conceive how realities can be mutually transcendent and yet knowable. For my part, I find that whenever I try to think of a plurality of mutually exclusive things, I put *myself* behind them, and conceive of them as a plurality only by bringing them together in my consciousness. Frightened by the bogey of pantheism, you stoutly resist the doctrine that the plurality of individuals is contained in the unity of a single Absolute consciousness, but you end by putting *yourself* in the place which

¹ *The Conception of God*, pp. 98-99.

² *Ibid.*, p. 99.

the Absolute consciousness is made to vacate. If the prerogative of the Absolute consciousness had not been challenged, you might have said that you conceive of plurality by putting individuals together in it, and that you also participate in this consciousness. But now that you demolish absolute idealism, you are bound to make your lonely self the synthetic principle, if the possibility of knowing, as well as of being, is at all to remain. Surely *this* is solipsism with vengeance. The fact is that the Absolute comprehends within itself all finite individuals, and imparts to them its own being and freedom. Any other supposition is simply inconceivable and absurd. If the reality of the individuals depends upon that of the Absolute, the Absolute, on its part, has being only by differentiating itself into the individuals which the totality of its life includes. As Hegel says: "If God be the abstract super-sensible essence or Being which is void of all difference and all specific character, He is only a bare name and a mere *caput mortuum* of the abstract understanding."

Can personality be predicted of the Absolute? After what has been already said, the answer to this question ought not to be doubtful. One thing is certain. The Absolute cannot be less than personal. But personality is essentially a finite category. It implies a plurality of beings possessed of rights and acknowledging duties to each other. We cannot conceive of the Absolute as such a being. Then we have to remember that the Absolute consciousness is an all-embracing, all-reconciling unity, which perceives all things *in* space and time and yet transcends them, which includes as component factors of itself all the conflicting items of experience that we have and yet harmonizes them in a perfect synthesis of which we have only an exceedingly obscure knowledge. Is it not misuse of language to call such a reality personal? You may, if you please, characterize it as *super*-personal; but personality is a category too poor to fathom its depth. On this question, as on many others, Professor Royce is unable to side with Mr. Bradley, and declares himself in favor of the personality of the Absolute. But his own view of the nature of the Absolute does not, I think, lend support to his thesis. "All these names," says he, "'Absolute Self,' 'Absolute Thought,'

‘Absolute Experience,’ are not, indeed, mere indifferent names for the inexpressible truth ; but, when carefully defined through the very process of their construction, they are equally valuable expressions of different aspects of the same truth. *God is known as Thought fulfilled ; as Experience absolutely organized, so as to have one ideal unity of meaning ; as Truth transparent to itself ; as life in absolute harmony with idea, as self-hood eternally obtained. And all this the Absolute is in concrete unity, not in mere variety.*”¹ Is what we understand by a ‘person ’ anything like this ? If not, it is impossible to attribute personality to the Absolute. There is no *person* whom we know, or have ever heard of, in whose experience ideas are completely harmonized with facts. A perceptive understanding, to be sure, is more than a person.

In conclusion, I think it desirable to allude very briefly to the question, whether absolute idealism can justly be described as gnosticism, with which it is so often identified. If it is gnosticism to boldly maintain that the supreme Reality is an all-unifying spiritual principle, absolute idealism has, unquestionably, no difference with it. But this idealism disclaims all knowledge of the details of the life of the Absolute. All that it aspires to do is to sketch the merest outlines of it. No philosopher can ever hope to explain how the Absolute transcends space and time without nullifying them, gathers up into itself all finite selves without, in the slightest degree, abrogating their individuality, and brings perception and conception into perfect accord with each other. We cannot but believe that the ultimate truth is such. But we walk more by faith than by sight. There is, therefore, ample room for faith within the limits of absolute idealism ; only it does not breathe defiance to reason, but walks along the path which reason indicates.

HIRALAL HALDAR.

BERHAMPUR COLLEGE, BENGAL.

¹ *The Conception of God*, pp. 45-46. The italics are mine.